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SUBJECT: Consular Field Trip to Haifa

1. Begin summary: On 13 December 2004, the American officers of the Consular Section traveled to Israel's northern port city of Haifa for meetings with community leaders, including the mayor, the chief of police, and others, as well as from a tour of the Haifa Consular Agency. Officers benefited from exposure to Israel's most culturally diverse and progressive city. End summary.

2. On 13 December 2004, a group of 10 Embassy consular officers traveled to Haifa to meet with city and community leaders and visit the Consular Agency. Haifa is Israel's third most populous city, after Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, with a population of just over 300,000. Its population is diverse by Israeli standards, with some 82% Jewish-Israelis, 10% Arab-Israelis (split evenly between Christians and Muslims), and 8% classified as "other." Haifa is also home, for the time being, to Israel's largest seaport (though according to Mayor Yona Yohav, Haifa's port will be soon be exceeded in size by the newer port in Ashdod). Though the city's local economy has suffered from the economic stagnation throughout Israel of recent years, it benefits from the presence of Intel, Microsoft, and other high-tech facilities. Haifa is also home to two of Israel's most prestigious universities, Haifa University and the Technion.

Mayor Yahav

3. The first meeting of the day was with Haifa's Mayor, Yona Yahav. Mayor Yahav, a Labor-party veteran who served after graduation from Hebrew University law school as an aide to legendary Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek, was elected in 2003 as the candidate of the Green, Neighborhood, and Shinui Parties. He has a daughter in law school at Yale. The mayor discussed at length a theme that was repeated throughout the day: the historical tolerance and ethnic diversity that characterizes Haifa and gives residents of the city an optimistic outlook elsewhere in short supply among Israelis. The Mayor hopes to raise Haifa's profile worldwide as a unique model of a positive, culturally inclusive future not just for the Israel but for the entire Middle East. He showed conoffs a short film building on the above themes, which he had been proud to present at the August 2004 AIPAC meeting in the US. He noted that AIPAC groups are now adding Haifa to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem as necessary stops on their visits to Israel.

Police Chief Meriesh

4. (SBU) Haifa District Police Chief Nir Meriesh Col. Meriesh graduated with a BA in business administration from Haifa University, as well as a master's in government from the JFK School of Government at Harvard, where he went on scholarship. A former IDF Major, he served in the past as commandant of the Police Academy in Israel, as commander of the northern division of the local highway patrol, and as commandant of the police officers academy. Meriesh described for conoffs not just the success of the police in maintaining civic order among closely knit Arab and Jewish Israeli communities, but also the challenges of dealing with and encouraging assimilation of recent immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

5. (SBU) According to Meriesh, many of these immigrants had forced Haifa to confront largely unknown problems,, including organized crime families, drug trafficking, prostitution and homelessness. He spoke graphically of alcoholic immigrants emerging from passenger vessels in the port to disappear into the streets with their meager belongings, turning up later in hospitals or dead. To cope with the problems, Meriesh said he actively recruits FSU immigrants to serve on the police force and in social welfare jobs, hoping thereby to improve ties with and intelligence on groups comprising the community.

6. (SBU) Meriesh also described the police staffing strain imposed by the need to prioritize response to/anticipation of terrorist attacks and/or political disturbances. When a major incident occurs or is feared likely to occur in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, the Haifa police force, like those elsewhere, are called on to supply officers. Col. Meriesh says Haifa can ill-afford to lend its officers and that the city invariably suffers a spike in crime when the force is

depleted.

Haifa University

17. After a visit to the harmoniously multi-ethnic Rubin Conservatory of Music, one of Israel's leading music schools, and the Bahai Centre and Gardens, the world headquarters of the faith, the trip concluded with a visit to Haifa University to meet with Professor of History and outgoing Dean of Students, Ron Robin. Professor Robin highlighted the unequalled ethnic diversity of the students at Haifa University: 20% of the total student body are Arab Israelis as well as 7% of the social science faculty. Robin was careful, though, to characterize HU as "pluralistic" rather than "multicultural." He said that the dominant culture on campus is Jewish-Israeli, and the language in the classroom is Hebrew. Nevertheless, he stressed that within this framework, all viewpoints and cultures are given space for expression.

18. During his term as Dean, the Professor noted, he had prioritized establishing links with the city of Haifa. He is particularly proud of a program he initiated whereby students are housed in depressed neighborhoods in exchange for grant money. The goal of the program is to provide the children of these neighborhoods with positive role models and promote university education as an avenue of social advancement. Some 100 students are expected to participate during the next school year.

19. Comment: Conoffs benefited from a first-hand look at and discussion of economic and other conditions in Israel's third-largest city, as well as a tour of the Consular Agency. Junior Officers, especially, enjoyed an opportunity, for many of them the first, to participate in meetings with host-government officials and others.

110. The tone of the trip was refreshingly upbeat. Optimism mixed with communal pride in the presentations by each of the three principal hosts. All stressed that the success of the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants of Haifa in living harmoniously together should be considered a model for peace throughout the Middle East. End comment.

Kurtzer